

“THE MESSAGE OF ZEPHANIAH”

Zephaniah 3:1-20

These prophets are a gloomy lot, aren't they? Here's another catalogue of death and destruction, just as we have seen in a number of these other Minor Prophets. They're always complaining – either about the people or to God himself. But there are also glimpses of peace and assurance for God's people which shine through the oracles of doom and gloom, and this morning we're going to think for a few moments about the message of hope and security that is brought to God's people by his prophet Zephaniah.

First, though, let's just sketch in a bit of background. Zephaniah was another contemporary of Jeremiah, living during the reign of the young King Josiah. He's reckoned to have been an aristocrat, especially if we take his descent from Hezekiah (1:1) as being from the king of that name. These words were first spoken some time after 640BC, when Josiah ascended the throne of Judah, and before 612BC when Nineveh was destroyed (2:13). Although the reforming king Josiah was now in control, the people had lived through the reigns of two particularly evil kings, Manasseh and Amon. Under their rule, when Judah was no more than a vassal state of the mighty Assyrian Empire, the spiritual and moral state of God's people had taken an alarming turn for the worse.

In chapter 1, Zephaniah outlines some of the sins that were widespread in the country and for which judgement is soon to fall upon the people. As is so often the case, these sins are by no means confined to the people of the prophet's day and we can see their echoes in every age since that time, not least in our own contemporary society. There are very few sins that are ever confined to a particular time and place, and part of the enduring relevance of God's word is the way in which he speaks through its pages to the people of every generation. If you've got your Bibles open, you can flick back a couple of pages and follow through some of these things.

SYNCRETISTIC RELIGION (1:4-6,9a)

The people of God – and, what is worse, their religious leaders – had been mixing up the worship of the One True God with all kinds of other pagan practices. They worshipped Baal and Moloch, practised astrology and idol worship, and follow silly superstitions (1:9a probably refers to a silly superstitious practice that came from the worship of the Philistine god Dagon, as described in *1 Samuel 5:5*). It's easy for us to point the finger as such goings-on as multi-faith worship services in Christian churches and cathedrals, where Jesus is worshipped as one of any number of other deities. But concentrating on that can mean that we overlook the parts of our own lives where we try to marry our Christian faith to all sorts of other ideas from the world around us that are incompatible with our allegiance to God. Let us not forget the words in 1:6 about turning away from the Lord and, more especially, “*neither seeking the LORD nor enquiring of him.*”

THE ADOPTION OF FOREIGN CULTURE (1:8)

This is where we need to be very careful in the way we interpret Scripture. Is God really going to punish all those who wear foreign clothes? Does that mean I have to get rid of my Benetton shirts and burn all my French ties? Will we see Christian T-shirt manufacturers cancelling their orders from the USA? I think not! Zephaniah is referring to the habit that some of their rulers had of wearing clothes in the style of their Egyptian and Assyrian overlords, and then adopting a whole set of values which went way beyond what God considered acceptable.

Fashion today – like so many other aspects of our daily lives – is so multi-national that we cannot escape wearing clothes from another nation or culture, but we must beware of the values that we adopt with our clothing and the messages that our appearance transmits to those around. For example, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with short hair on a woman, but it caused a lot of bother in Corinth because there it was one of the signs of a prostitute, so Paul had to warn the women of that church about it. The slogans and prints that many people wear on their T-shirts – the violent and occult imagery of some rock groups, occult and pagan imagery that appears on some shirts, sleazy double-entendres – they all have their effect

on us and on those who see us. Clothing that is deliberately calculated to arouse sexual feelings in others needs to be worn with care!

DECEIT AND VIOLENCE (1:9b)

There was an awful lot of violence that went on in the name of religion in the time of the Old Testament – and little seems to have changed. There is still a lot of deceit that goes on in our lives as well, and we can easily find ourselves carrying that over into our church life as well. Gossip, half-digested stories that are transmitted as fact, little white lies – we are by no means immune from it as Christians. It's is perhaps more widespread in society at large, as is violence, but we need to do all that we can to try and stop it. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be salt and light wherever we can, and there's no better place to start than in our own fellowship.

CARELESSNESS AND COMPLACENCY (1:12)

For the prophets of Old Testament Israel and Judah, this theme runs through all their books, although it is never stated as explicitly as it is here. But it is still the greatest sin of the people of God. We can never utter any words which grieve the heart of God more than “*So what?*” Unless our lives are lived out and out for God, then we are, in effect, saying, “I don't care. God's not interested anyway.” How could Zephaniah's listeners, who had such a heritage of God's gracious provision in their lives, ever possibly think in such a way? And how can we, who are the inheritors with Christ of all God's glory, who enjoy the benefits of his saving work on the cross, who know how clearly the Bible spells out the choice between believing and rejecting God's offer of life, ever say, “*The LORD will do nothing, either good or bad*” ?

After that catalogue of denunciation, Zephaniah goes on to describe the judgement and destruction that is to come upon those who turn against God. God will punish all those who have disobeyed him and the prospects seem bleak. But as we read to the end of this prophecy – particularly in the passage we read just now – we discover that there are to be a few faithful people who will escape judgement (3:12), and to them the prophet says “*Be glad and rejoice with all your heart*” (3:14). That little sentence rings out down the centuries to us as Christians, those who have believed in God and followed Jesus. So why should we “*be glad and rejoice*” ? It seems to be something quite inappropriate in the context of everything else in this little book. Well, in the next sentence (3:15) we read of four reasons for rejoicing. Let's reflect on them one by one.

1. “THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY YOUR PUNISHMENT”

God has promised to punish all who stand against him, who disobey him, who rebel – in short, everyone who sins. That is a promise he made right at the very beginning and it is repeated many, many times in the Bible – more often as a warning than as a direct threat. But we read in *Romans 3:23* that we are all sinners and, as God always keeps his word, there appears to be no hope for us. Zephaniah's message to Judah was one of total destruction (3:6,8) and as we read through the first few chapters of Paul's *Letter To the Romans*, we see that that is true for all humankind. God **must** punish sin.

Yet, such is God's love for his creatures that he doesn't want anyone to be destroyed (look at *1 Timothy 2:3,4*; *2 Peter 3:9*) – so he's left in a bit of a quandary: he must keep his word, but he longs to show his love. There needs to be some way in which his anger can be expressed and his judgement meted out, so he sent his Son, Jesus, to bear in his own body the punishment for the sins of all humanity. *Isaiah 53:4-6* is taken by Christians to be a prophecy that looks forward to the coming of Jesus. Looked at from a purely rational, human standpoint, it doesn't seem to make sense – it even (as many people say) goes counter to our own sense of morality. But Paul looked back on the events of Jesus' crucifixion and saws able to show that Jesus had taken away the punishment for our sin and, after seven chapters of *Romans* in which he goes closely over the whole argument, he bursts forth at the beginning of *Romans 8* with those tremendous words of assurance for those who believe in Christ. Our punishment has been taken away: let us be glad and rejoice!

2. **“HE HAS TURNED BACK YOUR ENEMY”**

Having been released from the punishment of God didn't mean that the people of Judah were suddenly free from the possibility of invasion. The Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Philistines were still around them, and in the ensuing centuries there were the Greeks and the Romans who would follow the old enemies into Israel. But God's protection was such that their attacks could never be ultimately successful. God would always turn them back from total victory over his people.

Believing in Jesus Christ and accepting that our punishment has been dealt with doesn't mean that we never feel the attacks of Satan, that all our problems are solved once and for all. Peter tells us in his first letter, in *1 Peter 5:8*, that “*your enemy the devil prowls round like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*” We will have setbacks, but we know that the victory has been won: we just **cannot** lose! Again in *Romans 8:37* Paul tells us that “*we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*” Jesus won the victory over the devil, over sin and over death in the events of Good Friday and Easter. I used to use a hypothetical scenario in the Premiership to try and explain this, but there's now an actual case we can use. A few seasons back Lichfield Hockey Club's third team had an astonishingly good season. They won all their matches and by such huge margins that by about the beginning of February they could not mathematically be beaten: they were already champions. But they still had to play the rest of their games, and there was still the possibility of losing a match, of injury to their players and of other short-term setbacks. But they played those last few games knowing that the victory was theirs. Jesus won the championship for us that Easter weekend. The season's not yet over – and we encounter setbacks, injuries, the occasional defeat – but we are champions, we are victors. Our enemy has been turned back: let us be glad and rejoice!

3. **“THE LORD, THE KING OF ISRAEL, IS WITH YOU”**

The people to whom Zephaniah was preaching were able to feel confident and assured because God had promised to be with them. As they looked back over their history there were many instances that they could recall when they had known his presence. In fact, their entire religious experience, their liturgy, their system of worship was built around the remembering of his mighty acts in the past. Today we have the assurance of God's presence not only because Jesus has come to earth as “*Immanuel, God with us*”, but because he has promised us his Holy Spirit. In *John 16:7ff* Jesus promises us the Spirit to live with us in his physical absence, and Paul, in *Romans 8:38,39*, emphasises that we can never, ever be cut off from Christ: he is always with us, whatever the circumstances.

Now, Paul wasn't talking idly here – he wasn't looking down from some ivory tower, out of some piously spiritual cloister. In *2 Corinthians 11:23-28* he gives us some idea of what he'd been through, yet he could still claim that nothing at all could separate him from Christ. In whatever situation you find yourself, be assured that God is with you there – he has promised it: let us be glad and rejoice!

4. **“NEVER AGAIN WILL YOU FEAR ANY HARM”**

As we've said, the problems didn't cease for the faithful people of Judah, and they don't for us. The difference now is that we need not fear them. We can look beyond the immediate concerns, in the knowledge that God is with us, and we can face the future in the belief that nothing can ultimately harm us. It's easy to say that, isn't it? It can seem very trite, a cliché that we hear time and time again – but hard though it might be to practise that sense of trust, it is no less true and can really help us as we learn more and more of its truth in our daily experience.

So let's close by having a final look at *Romans 8*. In *Romans 8:28,31*, Paul once again brings home the tremendous love of God for us and the assurance that he is on our side, he will always protect us and the eventual outcome will be for our good. There is no need to be afraid, no need to fear any harm. We are indeed God's people, those who believe in him. We are released from punishment, protected from our enemies and kept safe by the presence of God. As we take this bread and wine this morning, reminders of what it cost Jesus to seal those promises proclaimed by Zephaniah, let us rejoice and be glad!

Discussion notes on next page.

"BE GLAD AND REJOICE"
The Prophecy of Zephaniah

As with so many of the prophetic books at the end of the Old Testament, this once again seems to be a catalogue of death and destruction. But there are gems of peace and assurance that shine through the doom for God's people.

Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah, living during the reign of Josiah. He is thought to have been an aristocrat (especially if we take his descent from Hezekiah to be from the King of that name). The oracle was first spoken some time after 640BC, when Josiah ascended the throne of Judah, and before 612BC when Nineveh was destroyed (2:13). Although the reforming King Josiah was now in control, the people had lived through the reigns of two particularly evil kings, Amon and Manasseh. Under their rule, while Judah was an Assyrian vassal state, the spiritual and moral state of God's people had taken an alarming turn for the worse.

In chapter 1, Zephaniah outlines some of the sins which were widespread in the country and for which judgement is soon to fall on the people. They are sins which have their parallels today.

- Syncretistic religion (1:4-6,9a)
- The adoption of foreign culture (1:8)
- Deceit and violence (1:9b)
- Carelessness and complacency (1:12)

After the words of denunciation, the prophet goes on to describe the judgement that is to come on those who turn against God. The prospect seems bleak, but if we read on to the end of this book, we find that there are to be a few faithful people who will escape judgement, and to them the prophet says, "*Be glad and rejoice with all your heart*" (3:14). It's a sentence that speaks to us still today, especially at the time of year when we celebrate the coming of Jesus into our world. Why should that be? In the next verse (3:15), we read of four specific reasons for rejoicing.

- The Lord has taken away your punishment
- He has turned back your enemy
- The Lord, the King of Israel is with you
- Never again will you fear any harm

They are words that are echoed by Paul in *Romans 8:28,31*. God is on our side and will always protect us so that the eventual outcome will be for our good. There is no need to be afraid, no need to fear any harm. We are indeed God's people, those who believe in him: we are released from punishment, protected from the enemy and kept safe by the presence of God.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways are the sins of Zephaniah's contemporaries evident in our world today?
2. Why do you think the prophecies of destruction in the Old Testament are so graphic and apparently barbaric? What do they say about God?
3. Are we really aware of the possibility of punishment from God? Why/why not? What difference should it make to our lives and our evangelism?
4. In what ways can we know that God is with us?
5. Despite God's promises, we still fear harm. Why?
6. How do you respond to the words of these Old Testament prophets?

